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ABSTRACT

This study assesses parental satisfaction, parent knowledge, and parent involvement with the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Programs, public school programs for 3- and 4-year-old children. The sample consisted of parents of children enrolled in four ABC programs. Parent surveys were conducted and responses were obtained from 144 parents. Parent responses indicated positive attitudes concerning the care and education which children receive in the programs. Specifically, parents responded that: (1) they were welcomed as visitors in the programs (99%); (2) there were multiple opportunities for them to participate in the programs (98%); (3) they were informed of the day-to-day activities in which their children were involved (98%); and (4) teachers have good attitudes toward them and their children (94%). Areas were also identified in which parents indicated a need for additional information: (1) program philosophy and goals for children; (2) payments and refunds; (3) rules for attendance of sick children; (4) menus of snacks and meals; (5) parent-staff communication to ensure continuity; (6) parental evaluation of the programs' effectiveness, and involvement of parents in developing IEPs. The overall positive reactions of parents are attributed to parental involvement, the key element of the program. (BAC)

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Parent Responses to Public School Programs for Three- and Four-Year-Old Children

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Parent Responses to Public School Programs for Three- and Four-Year-Old Children

Abstract

Quality programs for young children include parent involvement. The National Academy of Early Childhood Programs has developed a 20-item parent survey to assess parental satisfaction in early childhood programs. This instrument also assesses parent knowledge and involvement with the program.

The Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Programs are funded public school programs for 3- and 4-year olds and are designed to include a strong parent involvement component. This study includes surveys conducted in four ABC programs (6 classrooms) and includes data from 125 parents.

Parent responses indicated very positive attitudes concerning the care and education which children receive in the programs (96%). Parents responded that: 1) they were welcomed as visitors in the programs (99%); 2) there were multiple opportunities for them to participate in the programs ((99%); 3) they were informed of the day-to-day events and special activities in which their children were involved (98%); and 4) teachers have good attitudes toward them and their children (94%).

Although the overall parental satisfaction with the programs was very high (96%), there were a few areas in which parents needed additional information for clarity. Further examination of areas for continued improvement and success of the programs is needed.

Parent Responses to Public School Programs for Three- and Four-Year-Old Children

Background

ASU-ABC

Arkansas State University's Programs for Children and Families in the Delta is a project funded by Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) for the purpose of providing direct services for at-risk three-and- four-year old children. The first goal of this project is to establish quality three-and-four-year-old programs in schools and communities throughout the Arkansas Delta. In realizing that to create real change or sustained improvement in a child's life, one must look at the home, family, and time spent outside of school; the second goal is to reach into the community pulling together resources which can improve the quality of the lives of children and families participating. The final goal is to use Arkansas State University as a resource to the Delta region by the establishment of model programs for children and families. ASU assists these programs through support services and in-service training so that they can serve as a research, demonstration, and training centers for others.

All of the ASU-ABC programs with the exception of one which is housed in a church, are located on public

school campuses and are provided in conjunction with local school districts. The criteria for enrollment in ABC programs, or a workable definition for "at-risk" includes:

Income Level of Parents (from $9,600 for a family of 1 to $26,582 for a family of 10) Parental Educational Level (non-high school graduate) Low Birth Weight (less than 5.5 lbs.) Teenage-Parent Household (if either parent was a teen at time of child's birth) Substance Abuse/Addiction (of parent and/or child) Physical Abuse or Neglect.

As the title implies, the program not only provides services for young children, but also includes a focus on families as a major component. The family program consists of the following components:

(1) a family resource management program
(2) an adult literacy program
(3) a parenting education program
(4) a parent volunteer/involvement program
(5) a parent advisory council

Communication and interaction with parents occur not only through these program components, but through the typical avenues of parent/school communication.

Program Managers, teachers, and aides communicate with families during home visits, parent conferences, open houses, field trips, and newsletters as well as at informal times such as dropping off or picking up children.

ABC exists because funding was established by the Arkansas legislature in 1991, initially for five million dollars. In 1992, funding was increased to 10 million and plans currently exist to ask for an additional 5 million in the legislative session of 1995. Funds for program enhancement are also available to ABC programs through both state and federal block grants. Arkansas State University receives over one-half million dollars annually to provide services for 180 children and their families throughout the Delta. Additional outside funding has been received for the development of the parent education and family resource management components. A Southern Governor's Grant was received to begin the parent education and parent advisory council components and funding from a private foundation has been secured to support the family resource management and literacy components.

Related Research

Several programs having the same goals as the ASU-ABC program in the area of parent involvement have

reported positive research findings. In "Preschool Education: A Responsibility to Be Shared with Parents," Tarrisse and Joly (1986) reported results of the program effectiveness of the Family Education Program of the Early Childhood Intervention Project. The outcomes of their study indicate that, with specific conditions and programs, it may be possible to increase parental participation in a preschool educational program. Of particular interest is their report that "family education" is one of the best ways to intervene, particularly for families of low socio-economic status or for families of ethnic minorities. The authors recommended and described a specific training program to elicit parental participation and involvement.

Herman and Yeh (1980) examined the relationship between parent involvement and parent and teacher satisfaction, and between parent involvement and student achievement. Findings indicated that parental involvement in the school leads to positive satisfaction of parents and teachers and increased student achievement. Parents' perceptions of their own level of input and influence in the decision-making process of school policies was seen as a direct correlate to parental satisfaction. The more influence

the parents perceived that they had in decision-making influenced: 1) their perceptions of parent-teacher relationships, and 2) their satisfaction regarding the learning situation. In addition, the results indicated that the amount of parent interest and participation in the child's program was positively related to the child's success and achievement.

To examine or review the success of a program's parental involvement component, several studies utilized parent surveys. In 1992, the South Carolina Department of Education used a parent survey to evaluate perceptions of the state's efforts to implement preschool programs for children with special needs (Harvin & Driggers, 1992). Similarly, Texas implemented an evaluation system which asked that parents complete a survey to provide input on the Spanish-speaking three-year-old preschool program attended by their children. (Jua'rez, 1991).

Hamlin (1987) also utilized a parent survey and questionnaire to evaluate the success of a program's parent involvement. The purpose of the survey was to determine if parent-staff contacts had been improved, to determine if parent participation had improved, and to determine if parent and staff understandings of developmental programming had improved. The results of

this survey indicated that improvement had occurred, and that staff-parent contacts had increased by almost 50 percent.

In looking at the effectiveness of parent surveys as a form of assessment, Glenn (1989), Hoerr (1989), and Stewart (1992) reported that parent surveys are excellent tools for determining the effectiveness of parent-teacher relationships. Hoerr (1989) further advocated the use of parent questionnaires for increasing the effectiveness of communication between teachers and parents.

Sample

The sample was comprised of parents of the children enrolled in the ASU-ABC Programs for 3- and 4-year-old children. ASU-ABC programs are located in 6 towns and include 8 different classrooms. Each classroom may enroll twenty children. Total enrollment for the 8 classrooms was 157 preschool children.

Procedure

Programs elected to participate in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation process. Each center conducted a Self-Study in which information was collected and mailed to NAEYC prior to the validation visit. Included in the self-study process were staff questionnaires, classroom

observations, parent questionnaires, and written documentation of program components.

Questionnaires (parent and staff) were provided by the NAEYC as a part of the National Academy of Child Care Programs' Accreditation process (Bredekamp, 1987). Teachers were asked to send the surveys home with the children. One hundred forty-four parents responded to the surveys. Survey results were obtained from 92% of the parents whose children were enrolled in the programs. Data were gathered prior to the validation visit. Tabulations were conducted following self-study of all programs.

Five of the programs who received validation visits were accredited. One program has not received a validation visit, put is currently preparing for it and has completed all of the self-study requirements.

Results

Parents generally responded very positively to the questionnaires regarding program quality (See Table I).

Insert Table I about here

There were nine areas in which 94% (or more) parents responded "yes" in terms of information and services

provided by the programs. These nine areas of strength were identified by analyzing the survey results. (See Table II).

Insert Table II about here

According to these results parents perceived that information was provided regarding hours of operation, day-to-day special events, and program and policy regulatory changes. Parents reported: 1) that they were welcome at all times in the centers, 2) they were provided opportunities to participate in the program, 3) parent-teacher conferences are held at least once per year, 4) teachers have a good attitude toward parents and their children, and 5) that they were satisfied with the care and education their children receive in the program.

Although there were no specific areas in which parents responded negatively, seven areas were identified in which parents needed additional information regarding the program (See Table III).

Insert Table III about here

Fourteen parents responded that they did not know or were not provided information concerning program philosophy and goals for children. Parents' responses also indicated lack of understanding and/or information concerning: 1) payments and refunds; 2) rules for attendance of sick children; 3) menus of snacks and meals; 4) parent communication to ensure continuity; 5) parental evaluation of the programs' effectiveness; and 6) involvement of parents in developing IEPs.

Discussion

These results provide valuable information for teachers and staff who work with children in these programs. It does appear that there is overall satisfaction by parents with the quality of services provided their children. There were some areas; however, in which additional training and education of parents and needed.

Some explanation for the overall positive reactions of parents to this program is the key element of "parental involvement" which is the cornerstone of the program. Parents are required to participate in the program in order for their children to participate. Parents also appear to be pleased with the information they receive from the teachers.

One possible explanation for the "negative" responses concerning payments and refunds is that although there are no payments or refunds in this program, parents may have experienced payments in previous programs and the questions may have been confusing to them.

The question regarding "continuity" also appeared to be confusing to parents. It seems that parents may not have understood "continuity" of services, or "continuity" between home and school.

The "IEP" question also appeared to have been confusing to parents. Since the ASU-ABC program is designed for "at-risk" children, parents may have viewed the question in terms of what "should" be happening. In addition, this program is not required to include "IEP" documentation for each child; therefore, this item needs further explanation for parents.

Implications

Implications for the ASU-ABC program are somewhat clear. Program managers and teachers must continue to communicate effectively with parents and continue to make them feel welcome in the classrooms. These things appear to be true strengths in this program.

In addition, parents need additional education and information regarding philosophy and goals, rules for attendance of sick children, menus of snacks and meals, "continuity", parental evaluation of the program, and

IEPs. Information in these areas may be provided through further communication in written format, informal meetings as well as formal parent meetings. Additional surveys may provide increased communication as previous findings indicated (Glenn, 1989; Hoerr, 1989; & Stewart, 1992). Most importantly, further examination of specific strengths and weaknesses within each program is necessary. Data were summarized for the purpose of this study, but further examination of data within each center can provide information concerning specific needs for improvement.

Although Accreditation has been awarded to four of the centers, on-going self-study and evaluation is required for re-accreditation and renewal. Parents must be surveyed each year in order to determine their level of education about each program and their views about quality care for their children.

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Table I

Summary of Responses to Questionniare Items

Question # on parent ?-aire	# of "don't know" responses	# of "no" responses	# of "yes" responses	# of "not applic-able" responses	Total
1-a	7	6	130	1	144
1-b	21	14	46	63	144
1-c	2	0	139	1	144
1-d	7	18	112	5	144
1-e	4	12	120	6	144
2	8	4	130	2	144
3	3	8	129	4	144
4	4	5	132	3	144
5	1	0	143	0	144
6	0	1	143	0	144
7	1	1	141	1	144
8	1	6	135	2	144
9	3	0	138	2	144
10	1	2	139	2	144
11	8	5	130	1	144
12	14	2	116	12	144
13	19	4	116	6	144
14	13	5	49	78	144
15	3	1	137	2	144
16	1	1	139	2	144
Totals	121	95	2464	193	2880

Table II

Items With Positive Responses

Question Number	Description	Response "don't know"	Response "no"	Response "yes"	Response "not applicable"
1c.	hours the program is open and holidays and closings	2	0	139	1
5.	parents welcome visitors at all times	1	0	143	0
6.	parent's opportunities to participate	0	1	143	0
7.	parents informed about day-to-day and special events	1	1	141	1
8.	parents informed about injuries, health and changes in eating habits of child	1	6	135	2
9.	parent-teacher conferences held once a year	3	0	138	2
10.	parents informed of program and policy or regulatory changes	1	2	139	2
15.	teachers have good attitude toward parent and child	3	1	137	2
16.	parent satisfied with care and education child recieves	1	1	139	2

Table III

Items With Less-Positive Responses

Question Number	Description	Response "don't know"	Response "no"	Response "yes"	Response "not applicable"
1a.	program's philosophy and goals for children	7	6	130	1
1b.	payments and refunds	21	14	46	63
1d.	rules for attendence of sick children	7	18	112	5
1e.	menus of snacks and meals or feeding time and food	4	12	120	6
12.	parents communicate to assure continuity	14	2	116	12
13.	parents evaluate program effectiveness once a year	19	4	116	6
14.	staff involve parents in development of IEP and address needs of parents	13	5	49	78